



A model of reciprocal hospitalableness for luxury lodges

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Abstract

This paper proposes a model of reciprocal hospitalableness that underpins luxury lodge experiences. It explores the occurrence of reciprocal hospitalableness when gratitude is elicited and identifies the mechanisms and practices that facilitate reciprocal hospitalableness among guests, staff, managers, and external parties. By employing a multiple-case study approach and high engagement research techniques, the findings shed light on how hospitalableness, encompassing dimensions such as belonging/fictive kinship, meaningful connections, altruism/generosity, comfort/homely feel, and inclusivity, is mutually reciprocated among experience participants in luxury lodge experiences. The findings also reveal mechanisms and practices adopted by the various experience participants to encourage and nurture reciprocal hospitalableness, extending the understanding of reciprocity beyond the host-guest relationship. The proposed model contributes to the literature on social exchange, reciprocity, hospitalableness, and transformative service research. Moreover, it has practical implications for luxury lodges, emphasising the significance of hospitalableness as a differentiating factor, and highlighting the potential of hospitable practices in fostering inclusive relationships within organisations and with the local community, thereby promoting social and economic sustainability in the broader tourism destination.

Keywords

Hospitalableness, Reciprocity, Luxury Lodges, Social Exchange, Transformative Service Research

Introduction

This paper proposes a model of reciprocal hospitableness that underpins the hospitality experiences of guests and hosts in luxury lodges, illuminating how reciprocal hospitableness occurs when gratitude is elicited and what mechanisms and practices facilitate reciprocal hospitableness.

Hospitableness has been an area of scholarly interest for nearly 30 years, which is seeing a more recent focus in the service marketing and management field, specifically within hospitality research (Qiu et al., 2022). Hospitableness is considered a significant factor in differentiating hospitality experiences (Mody et al., 2019; Tasci & Semrad, 2016) and is highly valued by hospitality guests as it drives experience quality and authenticity perceptions (Manfreda et al., 2023a; 2023b). The concept has been explored through various lenses and settings (Lashley, 2015; Tasci et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Despite the growing attention, hospitableness remains an ill-defined construct that requires further investigation into its relevance in commercial hospitality (Tasci & Semrad, 2016).

Hospitableness has been defined as the ability of individuals to be hospitable without expecting anything in return (Tefler, 2000). This ability is often overlooked in commercial settings, where the rules of reciprocity always apply (O’Gorman, 2007). However, hospitableness is also considered the emotional core of the guest-host relationship (Hemmington, 2007; Lashley, 2000). This relationship is characterised by social exchanges and is guided by a set of reciprocal rules. This has led to debates in hospitality marketing and management literature as the concepts of hospitableness and reciprocity are seen as dichotomous.

Establishing social interactions in commercial hospitality involves reciprocal interdependence, as explained by the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964). Relationships are built upon the social norm of reciprocity, when guests perceive a benefit from the host’s actions, they then feel the need to reciprocate in some way, driving behavioural responses (Gouldner, 1960). Whether reciprocity occurs directly between guests and hosts or indirectly in the presence of others (Bock et al., 2021), these behaviours are elicited by both positive and negative affective responses resulting from social interactions (Lawler, 2001), such as obligation and gratitude (Gouldner, 1960).

Obligation and gratitude both form part of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Gouldner, 1960; Kolyesnikova & Dodd, 2008). However, obligation has been found to elicit negative emotions and discomfort as it arouses a sense of indebtedness, which constrains the relationship to a purely transactional level (Audrain-Pontevia & Garnier, 2021; Bock et al., 2016; Dewani et al., 2016). In contrast, gratitude is acknowledged as the key emotional core of reciprocity and the driving force in the development and maintenance of long-lasting relational bonds between guests and hosts (Bock et al., 2016; Fazal e Hasan et al., 2014; Huang & Lin, 2021; Kim & Baker, 2019; Palmatier et al., 2009). Gratitude can elevate

exchanges between customers and providers from transactional to relational (Raggio et al., 2014). This is particularly relevant in relationship-intensive industries such as hospitality, which is defined by the relationship between guests and hosts and is underpinned by social interaction (Hemmington, 2007; Solnet et al., 2019).

Previous research has linked guests' experience of the host's hospitableness to the elicitation of gratitude, which can drive hospitableness to be reciprocated in specific hospitality settings (Altinay et al., 2023; Manfreda et al., 2023a). However, the extent to which these feelings are reciprocated between guests and hosts has not been identified, and in particular, it has not been considered that such reciprocal hospitableness can extend beyond this relationship to involve other parties (Bock et al., 2016). Until now, hospitableness has mostly been studied as a trait or inclination of hosts (Lashley, 2015; Tefler, 2000), and this same trait might extend to guests and others in the co-creation of the experience through the elicitation of gratitude.

Methods

The data for this paper has been taken from a wider study that aimed to explore the personal and context-specific experiences of guests in luxury lodges using a qualitative multiple-case study methodology informed by a constructivist paradigm. Three case studies were sampled from Australian luxury lodges.

Participants in each case study were sampled both prior to the fieldwork and then on-site by using a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques. Lodge managers and staff were recruited via email and through research flyers displayed by the lodge managers in the lodge staff areas prior to fieldwork or directly while on-site during interactions with the researcher (first author). All lodge guest participants were instead recruited directly on-site by the researcher or through a letter invitation placed in their rooms by the staff. By using these techniques, the researcher aimed to capture a variety of perspectives (guests, staff, managers) (purposive) while being cognizant of the highly exclusive and inaccessible context (luxury lodges) and the limitations that come with luxury accommodation establishments with a small guest capacity. To overcome these challenges, snowballing convenience and snowballing sampling were further applied once on-site.

During the fieldwork, data was triangulated through a variety of methods and sources, including (1) researcher's participant observations as a guest of the luxury lodges through overnight stays and guests activities; (2) researcher's participative shadowing of the lodge hosts (staff and managers) during their work days, and (3) semi-structured interviews with guests (individual and dyadic) and hosts (individual). The chosen techniques allowed the lead author to build close and intimate relations with participants in each setting, culminating in the collection of rich and insightful data. Together with documentation, archival records, and physical artefacts (526 photos and videos), data comprised 37 interviews with 45 participants, nine shadowing sessions with lodge hosts, and 229 hours of direct and participant observations. Each case was analysed within-case and iteratively using thematic analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2006), with key themes identified for each case. The findings were compared across cases to identify similarities and differences to build transferable theory. The preliminary findings of this study will now be discussed.

Preliminary findings

From the data analysis, a model of reciprocal hospitableness in luxury lodges inductively emerged. The preliminary model (Figure 1) features relationships among guests, hosts (staff and managers) and others (other guests and the broader local community and external parties involved in the experience creation). These relationships arise and are nurtured by a pervasive sense of mutual gratitude felt throughout the experience by all participants in their own roles (guest, host, others). These participants' distinctions and subsequent roles align with the ones highlighted by Harkison (2018) and Manfreda et al. (2022) in relation to luxury accommodation co-creation processes.

For each experience participant, a bi-directional relationship exists, supported by a range of behaviours and practices that lead participants to give (create) and receive (experience) a sense of belonging and fictive kinship, meaningful connections, altruism and generosity, comfort and a homely feel, and inclusivity. These five dimensions of hospitableness, placed in the model's 4 centre, appear closely aligned with the existing literature on hospitableness (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012; Medema & de Zwaan, 2020; Tasci & Semrad, 2016).

Below we present the model, and a table of the attitudes, behaviours, and practices that enable reciprocal hospitableness among hosts (staff and managers), guests, and others.

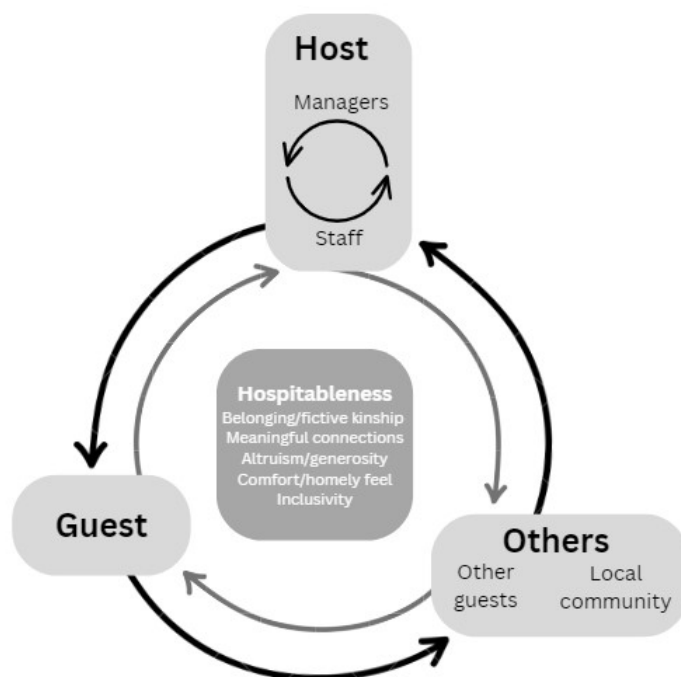


Figure 1. Luxury lodge reciprocal hospitableness model.

Experience participant	Relationship	Hospitable behaviours and practices
Hosts	Managers to staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading with care and sharing knowledge. • Nurturing an internal employee-centric culture of care, kindness, and generosity. • Hiring people aligned to brand values and based on personality. • Valuing the employee experience. • Celebrating diversity and promoting staff equity.
	Staff to Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from management and each other. • Supporting leaders' vision. • Teamwork – having each other's back.
	Hosts to guests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing and celebrating the service backstage. • Displaying hospitable attitudes – happy, genuine, caring, attentive, friendly, and passionate. • Becoming up-close and personal with guests – giving guests a generous amount of time and attention through job design that encourages freedom and flexibility. • Encouraging employees to be themselves – unpretentious, authentic displays • Design experiences to encourage the establishment of guests communities • Offering and guiding guests through equalising experiences • Offering guests tailored little surprises and inclusions (generosity)
Guests	Guests to Hosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in operational tasks (tidying up room for housekeeping, bringing dirty glasses to the bar) • Make hosts feel comfortable during service encounters • Natural inclination to be curious/people-centric – be open to sharing personal details/stories to motivate and create personal bonds with hosts • Directly praising employees through reviews and onsite
	Guests to Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guests taking on hosts duties with other (new) guests • Friendliness • Likeliness • Feeling a need to make other experiences better • Willingness to share recommendations and experiences with other guests • Making other guests feel equal • Giving back to the community by purchasing local
Others	Others to Guests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing with guests local knowledge • Sharing recommendations (guests to guests)
	Others to Hosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locals willing and open to sharing local knowledge with hosts • (genuine connections with locals) • Training staff and making them feel part of the local community

Table 1. Behaviours and practices conducive to reciprocal hospitableness

Conclusions

This paper presents initial findings from a wider study which have resulted in a luxury lodge reciprocal hospitableness model. The findings contribute to the literature on social exchange, reciprocity, hospitableness, customer experience, and transformative service research,

holding significance for practice in luxury lodges and, more broadly, luxury accommodation settings. The model extends reciprocity theory beyond the host-guest relationship, encompassing others and various levels within the host organisation (staff and managers). It adds to the literature on hospitableness and social exchange by demonstrating how hospitableness and reciprocity can, in fact, become a virtuous cycle driven by mutual gratitude during experience co-creation, providing extended benefits to all experience participants and the ability to drive transformative service in hospitality organisations. This model is particularly significant for practitioners in luxury lodges and the broader luxury accommodation sector, where hospitableness is considered a key differentiator of the guest experience. The model also holds inherent importance for the applicability of hospitable practices not only within the well-researched host-guest exchange but also in creating more meaningful and inclusive relationships within hospitality organisations and between hosts, guests, external providers and the broader local community. This model has the potential to be a catalyst for positive change within transformative services, in destination management, and destination social (and economic) sustainability, reshaping the often controversial role that luxury consumption holds in tourism activities and their impact on people and places.

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